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ABSTRACT

Teaching family communication is unique. However, unlike courses in small group and interpersonal communication, which illustrates communication processes in experiential settings, family communication courses cannot create "families" in the classroom. As such, film and television depictions of the family become all the more important in their ability to illustrate key concepts of family communication theory while providing common experiences for classroom discussion. Accordingly, this paper has two purposes: (1) to inform and affirm the ways in which films and television programming can be used to illustrate significant family concepts, relationships, and issues in family communication courses; and (2) to demonstrate how the examination of media families helps students to learn more about culture's representation of this most important social institution. After exploring the impact of mass media portrayals of families, the paper discusses ways in which such films as "Ordinary People," "Terms of Endearment," "On Golden Pond," and "Frances" can be used to teach various family communication concepts and topics. The use of films' and television shows' depictions of the family in a course stimulates students to take a closer look at their own families and themselves, and to understand how mass mediated images of the family shape their own expectations of family life. It is not so much students' tears or laughter after viewing a film that makes one better understand a family concept, but rather their follow-up questions, comments, and related personal stories. Critical analyses of families in film and television gives teachers and students a platform for discussing family life in America and the tools to delve more deeply into mass media portrayals. (Contains 49 references.) (RS)

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# A Mass Media-centered Approach to Teaching the Course in Family Communication

**Susan Mackey-Kallis and Sharon Kirk-Elfenbein**

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**Abstract**

Teaching family communication is unique. Unlike courses in small group and interpersonal communication, which can illustrate communication processes in experiential settings, family communication courses cannot create "families" in the classroom. As such, film and television depictions of the family become all the more important in their ability to illustrate key concepts of family communication theory while providing common experiences for classroom discussion. Accordingly, this essay has two purposes, to inform and affirm the ways in which films and television programming can be used to illustrate significant family concepts, relationships, and issues in family communication courses and to demonstrate how the examination of media families helps students to learn more about culture's representation of this most important social institution. After exploring the impact of mass media portrayals of families, the essay discusses ways in which such films as Ordinary People, Terms of Endearment, On Golden Pond, and Frances can be used to teach various family communication concepts and topics.

## A Mass Media-centered Approach to Teaching the Course in Family Communication

Family communication has become a growing area of study in the communication field. In the past decade, communication students, teachers, and researchers have become increasingly interested in family communication. Indeed, many scholars focus on marital and family communication as their primary areas of research and teaching (Fitzpatrick & Badinzinski, 1985; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Bochner & Eisenberg, 1987; Gottman, 1982, Raush, et al., 1974, 1979). Universities are also offering more courses on the family and family communication. In the communication field, four textbooks (one forthcoming) have been published in the area of family communication just in the past decade.

Growth in the field of family communication has been accompanied by increased interest in the mass media as a source of information about reflections of contemporary American society and the family. For example, a day-long short course entitled "Family Communication Goes to the Movies," was offered at the 1991 National Communication Association Convention and 1991 Eastern Communication Association Convention. Many nationally recognized scholars in the areas of family communication, interpersonal communication, and media criticism attended both sessions. Two questions were continually raised at these meetings. First, unlike courses in small group and interpersonal communication, which can illustrate communication processes in experiential settings, family communication courses cannot create "families" in the classroom. As such, how can

film and television depictions of the family be used to illustrate key concepts of family communication theory while providing common experiences for classroom discussion? Secondly, given that the family is the focus of the vast majority of television entertainment programming and of a significant number of American films, how do these representations shape students' perceptions of their own families and family communication in general?

Family communication researchers have recently focused on the use of short stories to teach courses in family communication (Long & Grant, 1992). Interpersonal scholars have also examined the use of feature films to teach courses in interpersonal communication (Proctor & Adler, 1991). Although family communication teachers often use film and television (in addition to novels and short stories) to teach courses in family communication, little has been written about this use. Accordingly, this essay has two purposes, to demonstrate how the examination of images of the contemporary media family helps family communication students learn more about culture's representation of this most important social institution and to inform and affirm the ways in which films and television programming can be used to illustrate significant family concepts, relationships, and issues in family communication courses.

**Exploring the Impact of Mass Media Families**

In the 1992 presidential elections, family values became a central issue as Vice President Dan Quayle and the fictional character Murphy Brown, from the Emmy award-winning television show Murphy Brown, squared off in a heated debate over the definition of the traditional family. Dan Quayle attacked the sit-com for glamorizing single motherhood by its decision to have Murphy Brown have a baby alone. This resolution, Quayle claimed, was symptomatic of Hollywood's scorn for family values. Murphy Brown quickly responded to Quayle's criticism. In the 1992 one-hour season premiere of Murphy Brown, Murphy hears Quayle's remarks on TV while she tends her baby and responds, "I'm glamorizing single motherhood? What planet is he on? I agonized over that decision." Later in the episode Murphy formally responds to Quayle's charges on her television show, saying, "Perhaps it's time for the Vice President to expand his definition and recognize that whether by choice or circumstance families come in all shapes and sizes. And ultimately, what really defines a family is commitment, caring and love."

This battle between a Vice President and a television character should not be lightly dismissed since it highlights three key issues concerning the family in US America: (a) that definitions of the traditional US American family are changing (no matter what Dan Quayle says), (b) that Americans are as concerned as ever about family life, and (c) that the mass media plays a central role in defining the "average" family and in providing a lightening rod for public opinion about this most important of social institutions.

The US American family, for example, is experiencing dramatic changes in structure and gender roles. Some statistics about the family illustrate the changes it has experienced in structure. "The incidence of divorce has risen rapidly throughout this century, up 700 percent since 1900. . .. Experts estimate that four out of ten children born in the 1970s will

live in a single-parent household for part of their childhood" (Galvin & Brommel, 1986, p. 6). By 1988 only 7% of all US American households fit the traditional family image of "an intact marriage, a working father, a housewife mother, and two or more school-age children" (Galvin & Brommel, 1991, p. 7). We are seeing a rapid increase in single-parent families, but even in two-parent families, more often than not, these families are composed of two working parents. In 1986, 62% of married couples had two incomes. This figure indicates a 50% increase from 1976 (Galvin & Brommel, p. 7).

These changes in family structure are reflected in changing definitions of the family. In 1949, for example, Murdock defined the family as a group of people living together who share blood or legal ties (Murdock, 1949). In the late 1970s family scholars were defining the family as "an organized naturally occurring interactional system, usually occupying a common living space over an extended period of time, and possessing a confluence of interpersonal images which evolve through the exchange of messages over time" (Bochner, 1976, p. 382). In 1990 the family was described as "a multigenerational social system consisting of at least two interdependent people bound by a common living space (at one time or another) and a common history, and who share some degree of emotional attachment to or involvement with one another" (Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1990, p. 9). The change in definitions emphasizes that in more recent times family members may live apart, are not necessarily bound by legal or blood times, and might consider themselves a family based on strong reciprocal affections and loyalties.

In contemporary times, family members have also become part of a mobile society as members are often geographically distant from each other. The family has also moved from a producing to a consuming unit, members spending considerably more time outside the home shopping for items rather than in the home making goods together (Beebe & Masterson, 1986). The change in structure decreases the amount of time a family spends together. With the definitional and structural changes of the family other changes are also inevitable.

Family roles have changed. Men are no longer the sole or primary breadwinner, and women are no longer the only homemaker and child-rearer. These role changes modify relationships. A woman is often not as woven into patriarchal communication patterns so that, for example, a father does not always have the "final say."

There has also been increasing change in the ethnic composition of the US American family. As the number and variety of ethnic subcultures in this country grows the stereotype of what constitutes the "traditional" US American family is challenged. This is particularly the case because, McGoldrick (1982) explains, "ethnic values and identifications are retained for many generations after immigration and play a significant role in family life and personal development throughout the life cycle" (Galvin & Brommel, 1991, p. 9-10).

Teachers of family communication, wishing to explore with students the changes in family structure and composition and the change in family members' roles can turn to prime time television to explore this medium's response to these changes. During the 1980s, for

example, 21 of the 36 domestic situation comedies portrayed "non-conventional" families such as single-parent families, minority families, blended families, families with adopted children and legally unrelated families (characters in significant and interdependent relationships sharing a domestic situation) (Skill, Robinson & Wallace, 1987). Television, in other words, seemed to reflect some of the heterogeneity of family life as it existed in the 1980s and into the 1990s. Teachers and students can discuss together the vast range of lessons we learn about family life from television and the extent to which these portrayals reflect social trends and changes within the family structure.

Since television in the 1980s also celebrated the conventional family in extremely popular sit-coms such as "Family Ties" and "Growing Pains," teachers and students can also discuss the stereotypical portrayals of family in the media. The Seaver family of "Growing Pains," a white upper-middle-class first-marriage nuclear family, for many, did not seem much different from the Cleaver family of the 1950s sit-com "Leave it to Beaver." As Miller notes:

> Instant and complete media saturation provide us with various stereotypes of family life, ranging from the syrupy domesticity of *Leave It To Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch*, to the ideological sparring of *All in the Family* and *The Jeffersons*, and to the raucous repartee of *Roseanne* and *Married, With Children*. Most media pictures of minority family life are mere clumsy caricatures based on inaccurate, often demeaning stereotypes. . . . Small wonder, then, that there is confusion and dissension about how to live with and relate to other family members. (Cited in Yerby, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Bochner, 1990. p. xi).

Possibly because of the paradox of both diversity and homogeneity in types of families shown on US American television, and the paradox of change and lack of change in family portrayals on prime-time, the lessons television teaches us about our families are often stereotypical, contradictory, and confusing. As Taylor (1987) points out: "Few contemporary forms of storytelling offer territory as fertile as television for unearthing changing public ideas about the family. . . TV speaks to our collective worries and to our yearning to improve, redeem, or repair our individual and collective lives" (p. 6).

For better or for worse, however, the media is an important source of information concerning US American culture. Students can learn to examine mass media families to better understand the messages potentially shaping the US American family generally and their own family specifically. Teachers and students can discuss the extent to which we use mass media families as touchstones for our own expectations of family life while exploring ways in which mass media portrayals shapes our attitudes and ideologies about family life. According to Gerbner et al. (1980), "The seductively realistic portrayals of family life in the media may be the basis for our most common and pervasive conceptions and beliefs about what is natural and what is right" (p. 3).

Gronbeck, for example, examines the socio-ideological force of the television show *Family* in its portrayal of matriarchy. Speaking of *Family*'s audience, he explains "Those who

watched it were likely caught up at least in part by its doxastic beliefs in mother-centered, dual-parent, supportive nuclear families as the source of solutions and succorance in life. For them, it was a window on a "good" world, a "proper" life. This being the case despite the fact that "not all television viewers in the 1970s came from secure mother-centered, dual-parent, cuddling and caring nuclear families" (in press). Examination of the ideological underpinnings of mass media representations of family, in other words, invites teachers and students to talk about stereotypical representations of family life.

Teachers, when exploring media portrayals of family life with students, can make them aware of the various ways in which the mass media may act as a socializing agent. More specifically, teachers can ask students to reflect on ways in which the mass media, particularly television, socializes us regarding family rules, roles and structure. For example, many researchers argue that observation of symbolic behavior, along with direct and indirect experience, comprise three ways individuals develop a repertoire of interpersonal behavior (Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986). Two theoretical models that attempt to explain behavioral acquisition through observation of symbolic behavior are Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) and Gerbner's Cultivation Hypothesis (Gerbner et al., 1986). According to Social Learning Theory, the individual learns new behaviors not only by performing those behaviors (rehearsal), but also by observing others perform behavior as well. In fact, the repetitive trial and error method of learning is often unnecessary or impractical for the acquisition of skills when observation of symbolic behavior is sufficient if not superior.

Many researchers agree that the mass media is a powerful source for social learning or learning through observation of symbolic behavior (Gerbner et al., 1986; Gunter, 1984; Hawkins & Pingree, 1981; Watkins, 1985; Greenberg et al., 1980b). Studies indicate that viewers may make use of information gained from television characters when faced with situations that are similar to those experienced by those characters (Dail & Way, 1985; Doob & MacDonald, 1979; Gerbner et al., 1986, LoSciuto, 1972). Acting as a social learning role model, television "exposes people to many 'backstage' behaviors which provides opportunities for viewers to learn about the possible private emotions and motivation of role occupants. This depiction provides unique opportunities to increase understanding of others' perspectives and the ability to predict how others may behave in similar real-life situations" (Meyrowitz, 1985, cited by Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990). Indeed, research indicates that media families are used by viewers as models for their own behavior in families (Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982; Greenberg, 1980; Kaiter, 1988; Stroman, 1984).

**Learning About Family Communication From Film and Television**

Although some of the lessons we learn from the media may reinforce idealistic stereotypes of how a family "should" be or how family members "should" act, we should not overlook the use of mass media as a reference tool for family communication. Although the mass media often provide images of family life that make students feel inadequate (their own families don't seem to measure up to life in the Cosby's or the Seaver's house) films and television shows often give students a chance to be "a fly on the wall" observing someone

else's "family." The media often provide scenarios that can be used to talk about family communication, they can validate communication behaviors observed in students' own families (the "gee I'm not crazy for feeling that way" syndrome), and they can offer examples of family communication behaviors, family roles, and issues through which students can better understand our own family specifically, and family communication theory generally. Films and television shows, both old and new, can demonstrate the changes in family structure and roles while also illustrating significant contemporary issues and relationships in family communication and family communication concepts such as the double-bind and enmeshment.

For example, the 1982 film *Ordinary People*, illustrates the "double bind," a concept coined by G. Bateson in 1972 to describe a close and significant relationship, usually between family members, in which a person is "damned if they do and damned if they don't"--they are in a no-win situation maintained by ambiguous and often conflicting verbal and nonverbal messages. *Ordinary People* is a film about a family in which the mother, Beth, has good intentions towards her son, Conrad, but nevertheless sends him messages that make him feel trapped as if he is in a "big black hole" and feels as though he "can't get out." This classic film is used in many family communication classes because it crystallizes various family concepts and relationships.

*Thirty Something*, a television series that had both popular and critical acclaim, effectively demonstrated, among other things, the issue of "codependency," a term developed in the mid-80s to explain dysfunctional overly dependent relationships found primarily in families and significant relationships. In a codependent relationship, two people are dependent on each other with neither sufficiently independent to lead their own life (Beattie, 1987).

We see the concept of codependency illustrated, for example, in an episode of the show when one of the characters, Nancy, is visited by her mother, Eleanor. The two of them have a conflict about Nancy's marriage, Eleanor arguing that Nancy's husband, Elliot, is not good enough, does not care for Nancy, and thinks only of himself. Nancy tells her mother to mind her own business despite her realization that her mother does not have a life of her own outside of her children. Underlying their conflict is a codependent mother/daughter relationship. Eleanor depends on Nancy for her happiness and thus feels she must keep Nancy dependent on her. After Eleanor announces that she is moving into town to help Nancy manage her two children, Nancy asks Eleanor what she wants out of life. Eleanor replies: "I want to know my children are happy." Nancy responds: "We are, what else do you want?" Eleanor says, "Nothing." Nancy asks, "Nothing? Not a house, a boat, money, nothing?" The dialogue illustrates that Eleanor feels worthless without her children.

The consequences of Eleanor's dependency, like in all codependent relationships, is that it makes Nancy feel she is being depended upon and cannot have a life of her own because her mother needs her. Nancy is psychologically married to her mother and is reciprocally dependent on her mother to the extent that she cannot act without her mother's approval. Since her mother will not approve of Nancy's independence, Nancy cannot have a life of her

own. Nancy is also frightened to move into a career because although it seems like the career she would choose has too many obstacles, the career is actually blocked apriori by Nancy's marriage to her mother. In codependent relationships one is unable to maintain healthy relationships and careers.

The film, *Terms of Endearment*, provides a powerful portrait of an enmeshed family relationship. Enmeshment is a family function of the ability for distance regulation (Kantor & Lehr, 1976). A family can be interconnected (enmeshed) or unconnected (disengaged) (Minuchin, 1967). Connectedness, or cohesion, is "the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another and the degree of individual autonomy a person experiences in the family system." (Olsen et. al., 1979, p. 5). Healthy families establish a pattern of both separateness and connectedness (Hess & Handel, 1959). An enmeshed relationship, however, is marked by dysfunctionally high levels of cohesion. In an enmeshed family, "members are so closely bonded and overinvolved that individuals experience little autonomy or fulfillment of personal needs and goals" (Galvin & Brommel 1991, p. 20). When families only manage to remain connected and cannot withstand separateness they are enmeshed.

After defining enmeshment and illustrating it with extended examples from the film, the teacher and students can examine Emma's and her mother's enmeshed relationship in connection to their self-esteem and their management of relationships with significant others, particularly exploring the issues of intimacy, individuation, and personal boundaries. Teachers and students can also explore the communication climate that marks an enmeshed relationship (in *Terms of Endearment) a* climate marked by fear, unsupportive and punishing messages, and dysfunctional conflict management.

Fear, for example, motivates members of the Greenway family to entangle each other in a relationship web where no one is independent. Although we witness what appears to be a strong and loving attachment between Aurora, and her daughter, Emma, we soon realize it is a relationship marked by a painful and strangling love that precludes independence and individuation. Both mother and daughter are so entangled in each other's lives that they are unable either to care for themselves or maintain healthy relationships with significant others. Both fear independence because, although they may desire it, particularly in Emma's case, neither feels they can function without the other. The Greenway's web of dependency is known as enmeshment, a cohesive relationship marked by, and dysfunctional because of, the inability for individuation and separation.

In the Greenway's case, enmeshment is particularly dysfunctional because both mother and daughter use failure to further entrap and bind each other. For example, the night before Emma's wedding to her boyfriend Slap, knowing that her mother does not approve of the marriage (primarily because it will take Emma away from her) Emma still joins Aurora for a mother-daughter talk. Hoping to dissuade her daughter from this marriage, Aurora criticizes Emma, saying, "You are not special enough to overcome a bad marriage." An avenue for individuation (marriage and the chance to establish a new relationship) is denied Emma. She

is not "special" enough, i.e., she is a failure without her mother. In Terms of Endearment the Greenway's path towards growth is not lit by green lights but red ones--enmeshment promises a stop sign before every road that might lead to independence and individuation.

When teaching this film, the teacher can have the students describe the relationship between self-concept, relationships with others, and interpersonal communication. The teacher can ask students how these three concepts relate to enmeshment? She or he can have the students answer such questions as, how do Emma and Aurora manage conflict? How does Emma learn to have enmeshed relationships with her husband and children? Why might Flap, her husband, have extramarital affairs? What can Emma and Aurora do to manage or change their enmeshed relationship? Do you see enmeshment in your own personal relationships or in the relationships of people you know? Students can also be asked to role-play various situations, for example, an enmeshed relationship from the film, or from their own life or from the life of someone they know. They can be also asked to role-play a conversation between Emma and Aurora in which they attempt to change their enmeshed relationship.

When students hear lectures about families, double-binds, codependency and enmeshment they understand the concepts, but when they see films on double-binds, codependency and enmeshment, such as *Thirty Something*, *Ordinary People*, and *Terms of Endearment* it is as if a lightbulb turns on in their heads that makes them understand the concept and its manifestations more completely. After showing films on various family communication concepts or issues students enter into the class discussion more frequently and more energetically. They not only share general thoughts about the film, the concepts or the issue, but they also reflections on their own family. They ask more questions, wondering how their family relates to codependency or any other concepts a film or television show may illustrate. Film and television give students a platform for discussion while providing them with the tools to delve more deeply into portrayals of family life in the mass media.

Professors who teach courses in family communication seldom have a background in media studies, however we feel that regardless of a professor's expertise in media analysis, film and television can be a valuable resource as long as two guiding assumptions are adopted in the study of family communication in the media; (a) that since communication undergirds family functioning and development and must be viewed as transactional and holistic (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967), mass media needs to illustrate this holistic communication process and, (b) that a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach to the study of family in the media is most helpful.

**A Holistic View of Family Communication in the Media**

The family can neither be understood nor analyzed in media portrayals without acknowledging communication's central defining and regulating role in the family's life cycle. This involves a dual focus; how communication patterns impact family development and how family development (or stasis) shapes communication patterns. Communication as transactional is defined as the process of sharing and negotiating meaning whereby all participants affect and are affected by the others (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967).

As a process, communication is continuous and changing. As families change over time their communication will also change. In fact, if communication patterns remain static, the growth of the individual family members and the family as a whole will be inhibited. Yerby et al. explain:

Stability provides the comfort that comes from the predictable and the familiar, but without change a family cannot adapt to various stages in the lives of the members. Family members grow older, circumstances change, and relationships can develop qualitatively. However, as family members mature, the predictability that gives the family stability may make it difficult for the family to change some of their patterns (1990, p. 21).

Yerby et al. (1990) provide an example from the film *On Golden Pond*. The heroine, a woman in her forties, feels like a child whenever she visits her father. He reciprocates by playing the role of tyrant, despite some of his own feelings of childlike helplessness and rage at growing old. By the end of the film both daughter and father, after much conflict and struggle, find new ways of accepting themselves and each other that do not require them to take the static roles of paternal tyrant and helpless child.

A transactional or holistic view of communication would be necessary for the teacher and students to explicate both the conflict between the characters and the possibility for eventual resolve. This perspective requires showing extended scenes from the film, possibly making transcripts of excerpts of characters' dialogue available to students, involving students in discussion of how the family issues are conveyed both through the verbal and nonverbal dynamics among the characters, inviting students to look for the motivations for characters behavior and talk and the potential results of those behavior and talk, and helping students connect the film family's communication dynamics with their own family experiences.

**A Descriptive Approach to Family Communication in the Media**

A descriptive approach to family communication describes as opposed to a prescriptive approach which prescribes. A descriptive approach talks about the communication dynamics while a prescriptive approach gives advice about how one should act and communicate. A descriptive approach may implicitly prescribe but its purpose and focus is to describe what is present in the situation, or in the case of media analysis of family dynamics, what is present in the television or film scenario. A descriptive approach to the analysis of film and television families keeps the focus on observing and commenting rather than on offering value lessons and therapeutic advice to the students.

There are four models employed by researchers and teachers in the study of family communication, the therapeutic model, the skills enrichment model, the social-descriptive approach, and the systems approach (Beebe & Masterson, 1986, pp. 17-22). While each model differs in its focus, what underlies all approaches, and what makes film and television an essential aid in teaching and research, is that they can all be descriptive in nature.

A socio-descriptive model focuses on social trends that fuel a relational situation to be the way it is. It looks at society's impact on a relationship and how it may enhance the relationship's nature. Analyzing the film Frances, for example, the social-descriptive model would examine culture to understand the relationship Frances has with her mother, why Frances is acting as she does, and explain what finally happens to her. We might argue, for example, that Frances is a liberal who expresses her ideas and is degraded and punished for these views by her mother and society. In the end of this non-fiction film Frances is actually given a partial lobotomy to desensitize her nerves so that she does not feel as much, is not as perceptive and insightful, and is no longer an "endangerment" to society. A social-descriptive approach would look at how society during the 1940s (a time when rebels were silenced and the medical world viewed creativity as a threat to be stifled) impacted the family.

A skills-enrichment model focuses on skills that improve relationships, such as listening, speaking, and problem-solving. This model assumes that communication skills allow a relationship to exist and flourish and believes that if people are equipped with effective skills they can better manage their communication and relationships. Looking at Frances, this type of model would describe the communication dynamics between Frances and her mother and talk about how the characters could have changed their speaking, listening, and problem-solving skills in ways that were more productive for their mother-daughter relationship.

The therapeutic model focuses on why events occur and what causes them to happen. This model looks at reasons for the existence of various dynamics. A therapeutic model would look at causes for Frances' behavior, focusing on reasons for Frances' actions, behaviors, and thoughts. We may find that Frances' mother was emotionally abandoned as a child, craves the love she never received, is unable to achieve it herself, and tries to live out her dreams through her daughter's life and career. Thus, we might view Frances as a woman living out her mother's dream of becoming a famous actress. Finding the motivating factors behind Frances' actions, we may see that Frances needs to separate from her mother. Frances, for example, seems to recognizing this dynamic when she tells her mother, "I'm not you. I never will be. You want me to be who you want. Well, I got news for you. . . I'm not you. I never will be. And there's one thing that you should know and not forget. I don't love you and you can't make me who you want." When students hear this dialogue they better understand this dysfunctional codependent relationship, its manifestations, and its damaging effects.

The last model, the systems approach, looks at the entire family system to understand any or all parts of it. In Frances' case, we would look at how Frances' mother was abandoned by her own mother and thus has unresolved abandonment issues, how Frances' father was dominated and abandoned by Frances' mother and thus was coping with issues of domination and loss, and how Frances was abandoned by her father and engulfed by her mother, making it extremely difficult for Frances to attain nurturing, develop individuation and autonomy, and live any life other than one attached to and dependent upon her mother.

Regardless of the model of family dynamics used in an analysis of family using film and television, the family concepts, relationships, or issues discussed in relation to the media source are colored-in and elucidated with richer, thicker, details that brings family theory to life. As teachers of family communication, we look for films and television shows that do not simply provoke emotional responses but that clarify concepts, issues, and ideas. It has been our experience that after taking a family communication course, many students peak in their desire to attend graduate school. It is not just the discussions and exercises or our enthusiasm that heighten this interest. Films and television shows invite students to understand family communication from a new perspective, to look at their own families, and to look at themselves. Films and television shows often crystallize for students a picture of where they come from, who they are, and who they can become. Although we certainly cannot have an identity totally separate from our families, when students see families on film and television their awareness of themselves is heightened and their curiosity to see who they are next to their family is peaked. Just as students when they see themselves on videotape for the first few times get an increased awareness of who they are from a different perspective, students viewing families on film get an enriched sense of who they are inside of their family and apart from their parents and family of origin.

**Conclusion**

Although professors who teach courses in family communication seldom have a background in media studies, we believe that regardless of a professor's expertise in media analysis, film and television are a valuable resource. Examining contemporary television and film depictions of the family provide critical insight into these discourses while also adding clarity to the teaching and comprehension of family communication. We believe that the teacher, when using mass media to teach family communication, can provide students insight into how these contemporary depictions of the family influence views of our own families. Additionally, teachers can use television and film portrayals of families to facilitate discussion about family communication concepts such as the double-bind or enmeshment, or family issues such as alcoholism, death, or divorce. In other words, films and television shows provide the "common texts" that all members of the class share as they explore portrayals of family life in America and family communication issues and concepts. 	

We once had a student who saw *Ordinary People* in one of our courses in family communication. She returned the next day with a journal filled with over fifty examples of how her family contained double-binds, letters she thought of sending her parents, and pages of notes to herself about her relationship with her family and her future career goals. The use of films' and television shows' depictions of the family in a course in family communication stimulates students to take a closer look at their own families and themselves, and to understand how mass mediated images of the family shape their own expectations of family life.

It is not so much students' tears or laughter after viewing a film that make us think they better understand a family concept or issue, but rather it is their follow-up questions,

comments, and related personal stories. Because students can be privy to a family's drama over time ("living" as close as possible to a situation where they would not otherwise be permitted) they witness the daily routines, rituals, and conversations of family life, observe the battle zones of intense rage and conflict, and are able to connect these glimpses of media families with family theory and their own family experiences. Critical analyses of families in film and television therefore gives teachers and students both a platform for discussing family life in America and the tools to delve more deeply into mass media portrayals of family life.

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